



**MINUTES  
CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION  
January 5, 2021**

**CALL TO ORDER**

The meeting was called to order at 5:30 pm.

**Present:** Mayor: Charlie Miner; Council: Jahn Dyvik, Deirdre Kvale, Gina Joyce, and Mike Feldmann

**Staff Present:** City Administrator: Scott Weske

**Absent:** None

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**APPROVE AGENDA**

*A motion was made by Dyvik, seconded by Feldmann, to approve the agenda as presented. Ayes: all by roll call.*

**OPEN CORRESPONDENCE**

No one was in attendance to address the City Council during Open Correspondence.

**BUSINESS ITEMS**

**Background on Fire Department Structure, Review and Discussion of Support for a Regional Fire Service District/Joint Powers Agreement Concept**

City Administrator Weske reported that over the last number of months there were some meetings with Medina and members of the Fire Advisory committee in which they were having discussions to try and plan ahead with the knowledge that the current fire service contract is ending in 2025. He noted meetings were also held with surrounding communities and the Chiefs from those communities' fire departments such as Orono, Loretto, Hamel, Independence, Maple Plain, and Medina. Discussions have been held regarding the idea to approach fire service with a regional cost saving taxing district concept which will allow a platform to be created that would allow oversight of the fire service area that would not have to duplicate the expensive apparatus such as tankers and engines. He explained that the interested parties feel as though they have enough information based on the study that Medina has done showing consolidation options and removing municipal boundaries to create a larger service area. He indicated that staff's goal at this time is to start having more in-depth conversations with the Council to garner feedback on the idea.

Council member Kvale asked if the Council could get a copy of the study that was conducted by Medina.

Weske replied that Medina had been awarded a grant to conduct their study and noted that he would be able to forward it to the Council.

Fire Chief Van Eyll gave a brief overview of the information that was included in the Medina study regarding fire services and noted that it is actually very interesting information. He explained that the regional fire district idea is to establish a jointly owned fire department through a Joint Powers

Agreement between Medina and other cities that may be involved with this sort of fire department. He added that if the concept moves to a taxable fire district, which would need special legislation, that would end up looking more like a school board. It would not be owned by any municipalities but representation would be pulled from our elected officials that the fire protection district actually serves rather than straight elected officials.

Council member Dyvik suggested that it may be helpful for new Council members Feldmann and Joyce to have a summary of how things are currently structured for the fire department, what the City is considering moving towards and why, noting there is a whole history behind this issue.

Council member Joyce stated that although she knows bits and pieces, the type of summary Dyvik mentioned would be very helpful.

Van Eyll indicated that the Long Lake Fire Department has been in service since 1915, has done a great job, and over time has morphed into a paid, on-call volunteer department. He explained that in 2002, there was a joint contract executed between the cities of Medina, Orono and Long Lake to have the Long Lake Fire Department service areas of contract cities and to create a fire board to come up with some advisory type information, i.e. the Fire Advisory committee. He reviewed how the contract was set up and discussed the division of services and cost obligations. He gave an overview of how Fire Station 1 came about in its current location and noted that it has a separate agreement - the station is jointly owned 50/50 between Orono and Long Lake which is separate from the fire service contract.

Van Eyll commented that the paid, on-call fire department model is outdated and noted that many departments have switched to a duty crew model due to a nationwide shortage of volunteers. He shared some of the difficulties he has had getting volunteer coverage during the day because his firefighters have full-time jobs. He noted that this issue has improved over the last nine months due to COVID-19 because many people have been working from home, but he expects it to become an issue again once things return to normal. He provided examples of where there should be cost savings, improved response times, and service improvements by moving to a fire service district.

Mayor Miner reviewed the letter that was sent by Long Lake to Orono approximately one year ago outlining that the City would like to continue the arrangement as it currently exists by providing fire protection services to the City of Orono. He added that the letter had stated that if Orono was not in agreement with that, the cities could participate in mediation through the state. The City never received an official response to the letter, just some text messages from the Orono Mayor that essentially said that they would not be continuing the existing arrangement with Long Lake and would not participate in mediation.

Van Eyll reported that prior to COVID-19, the City Administrator from Medina, City Administrator Weske and himself had went to the Capitol building and met with Representative Hertauss and Senator Osmek to discuss possible future legislation surrounding establishing fire service districts.

Mayor Miner added that if legislation happens to not go through, a fire service district concept could still be operated through a Joint Powers Agreement which is similar to what the Excelsior Fire District has with six or seven participating cities.

Council member Dyvik recalled that the ball started rolling on this issue a few years ago after Orono made it clear that they were not interested in continuing with the current arrangement. He stated that the City received a letter from Orono that listed various ultimatums that were all just different ways of saying that the Long Lake Fire Department was going to become the Orono Fire Department and they would own it, control it, or manage it; and if not, then the two entities would go their separate ways.

Council member Kvale asked about the letter included in the packet that had been sent to the State Fire Marshal by Medina.

Van Eyll advised that there is a meeting set up for January 21, 2021 for all the cities/departments that had participated in these meetings which include the Maple Plain Fire Department, Loretto Fire Department, Hamel Fire Department, and Long Lake Fire Department. He stated that staff feels this is the best road to walk down for fire service in the area and would like the City to consider sending a similar letter to the State Fire Marshal.

Weske noted that there are substantial politics involved when it comes to fire services, and a similar letter from Long Lake would serve as notice that the full Council would like Long Lake represented.

Council member Feldmann stated that it appears as though the Cloquet Fire District has been around since 2009 and asked if there was any information on the forward-looking cost avoidance and how much success they have had with that.

Van Eyll responded that there was a group that had visited Cloquet and met with a few of their board members last February. He stated that he has the meeting minutes and notes from that meeting that could be sent to the Council for some of those details. He noted that he had received recent clarification on Orono's position on a fire service district and read aloud the communication that he received from one of their Council members.

Weske stated that he feels it is safe to assume that Orono will not be participating.

Council member Joyce asked what would happen with Fire Station 1, since it is a 50/50 split between Orono and Long Lake.

Weske suggested that the easiest and cleanest way may be for Orono to buy Long Lake out of the land and the building. He added that there are a lot of variables and shared other possible options to build or retrofit other buildings. He indicated that if Orono chooses not to join, the City needs to proactively look at how this will be funded.

Council member Kvale commented that the City will also need to look at the timing of dropping the existing contract.

Weske explained that the current contract expires in 2025, but there is a clause that states that all parties can mutually agree to a different time, which could be sooner.

Van Eyll noted that Medina has sent termination letters to the Maple Plain, Loretto, and Hamel departments that do not have this out in their contract at the end of December 2020.

Mayor Miner indicated that both Loretto and Hamel fire departments are privately operated and non-profit corporations.

Van Eyll added that there are only about six cities in the entire state that still operate as a non-profit corporation and two are in this area.

Mayor Miner stated that the bottom line is that five years or less from now, the Long Lake Fire Department really won't exist as it does today.

Weske clarified that the goal of this meeting was to get as much detailed information to the Council as possible so everyone has the same information, and also to see what the current Council would

like to explore with regard to the fire department. He indicated that he would let the City Administrator from Medina know that the Council is leaning towards a letter of support.

Van Eyll added that a letter of support is not committing the City to going down this road, but rather expresses support for continuing to explore the options.

Mayor Miner requested that Weske send the Council all the existing contracts for review as part of these discussions.

Council member Kvale questioned whether any of the Council should attend the January 21, 2021 meeting with the State Fire Marshal.

Van Eyll stated that currently they have asked that no elected officials attend those meetings; however, he believes one of them could be invited to a future work session so the Council can discuss this situation with them in greater detail.

Mayor Miner noted that he had a short Zoom meeting last night with Mayor Martin and Council member Delorius from Medina as well as their City Administrator who brought him up to speed on what their elected officials were feeling. He indicated that there was an article published on December 17, 2020 that was headlined *Medina Looks Into Fire Service District Involving Four Cities*. He stated that their plan is to communicate the report information to all of their surrounding cities and encourage other cities to join them in a partnership.

Council member Feldmann lost his internet connection and dropped out of the meeting.

City Attorney Thames stated that he thought this had been a good conversation for the Council to have and there will be a lot of variables coming out in the months ahead that will give a bit more clarity on this.

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

**Utility Agreements** - Weske indicated that he thinks one of the options the City should consider is renegotiating its utility service connections and agreements with the City of Orono. He stated that he has sent information to the Council in the past about entities profiting from Long Lake utilities and the difference between what they are billing versus what the City is selling. He suggested that addressing the utility agreements is something that should be put towards the front of this conversation, with multiple agreements to be replaced by a more orderly overall agreement format.

## **ADJOURN**

*Mayor Miner adjourned the meeting by general consent at 6:28 pm.*

Respectfully submitted,

Scott Weske  
City Administrator